

Where There is Will, There is Google!

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Maharashtra has been the worst affected state by the COVID 19 pandemic. Pune, the IT hub of Maharashtra was one of the first to close down, a week before the rest of the country faced lock-down. Like others in the city, we were caught completely unawares while returning home on Friday, 13th of March, from the University.

I teach B. Ed and M.A. Education, both post graduate courses. Many of my students come from rural background where internet connectivity was a hindrance. Additionally, the number of devices was lesser than the number of people in the family who accessed them. To, overcome the challenge, the online sessions were conducted as per the convenience of majority of students and recording for others. Since we were already at the end of the academic session, the main task was to conduct doubt solving sessions. Thankfully, all the students have a valid email id and have at least one social media account. With the backdrop of the above-mentioned constraints, there were two things that I was looking out for - one, an asynchronous tool and a strategy that would solve their doubts; the other, that could help me know the topics that they found most difficult for a focused discussion during the online sessions. I did not want them to be hassled with learning new tools at this time. Google came to the rescue!

Google Doc as asynchronous peer-learning environment

I created a Google document titled "doubt solving" for each course, shared it with the respective students giving them editing access. I wrote clear instructions of using the document with example. They could post their doubts and were expected to answer to questions put by others. They were instructed to write their names below and to write only one point, thus enabling discussion amongst all. I guided, corrected their points wherever necessary in the form of 'comments' at respective places. We thus enabled a comprehensive asynchronous peer learning environment.

Google forms as a stepping stone towards a democratic flipped classroom: The second hurdle was to prioritize the selection of the topic for focused discussion. A firm believer of democratic class environment, I wanted to discuss their doubts rather than what could possibly be a doubt in my perspective. I created a Google form with a drop-down menu, listing the course, the topic and a short answer format item to write the precise doubt. I informed that the doubt-solving would be arranged in descending order of the votes. I instructed them to continue filling up the form on every Sunday. This enabled me to schedule all the doubt solving sessions with a focus, incorporating

flipped classroom elements.

Feedback from students: The students reported that the doubt solving document idea enabled them to ask doubts freely and by answering doubts, they were guided by the instructor- me. The students expressed that this activity eliminated the feeling of isolation while avoiding the clutter of WhatsApp communication. The students hinted that this type of exchange added to their motivation and gave them a feeling of being "heard". The students conveyed that the instructor was perceived to be "approachable".

Reflections: A democratic class room is the corner stone of an engaged class. To voice pinpointed doubts, the students had to be thorough with content. The doubt solving document, served as a channel for peer-learning, peer communication and learner-instructor communication. A well-planned strategy for asynchronous communication works effectively, keeps things organized and reduces the load of individual emails and that of data consumption. The flexibility of schedules saw more engagement of the students. Thus, simple and popular tools can be effectively used for a collaborative learning environment when planned carefully and with prudence.